DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 083 740 EA 005 585

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TITLE The Governance of Education.
PUB DATE 13 Nov 73
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at Annual Conference on Critical Issues in Education (11th, Edmond, Oklahoma, November 13, 1973)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS *Administrative Organization; *Governance; *National Surveys; *Public Education; *State Government

ABSTRACT

A national study of State governance of education has begun under the direction of Roald F. Campbell. The author here expresses concern that the persons conducting that study are focusing on a structure for governing education without regard to the functions to be performed at various levels of government. He argues first that the form of governmental structure in education should naturally flow out of a definition of functions to be performed. Secondly, he proposes that in any administrative structure, the guiding principle on the locus of decisionmaking should be to place every decision at the lowest level of the structure in which the decision may be safely made in the public interest. Finally, the author suggests that there is a necessary relationship between authority and responsibility. (Author/JF)

ED 083740

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THE GOVERNANCE OF EDUCATION

by

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delivered at

The 11th Annual Conference on Critical Issues in Education
Central State University, Edmond, Oklahoma
November 13, 1973

There is currently under way a national study of state governance of education, under the very capable direction of Dr. Roald F. Campbell of Ohio State University. The study is funded by the United States Office of Education, and emanated from a discussion of the Big 6--The National School Boards Association, National Education Association, American Association of School Administrators, National Council of Chief State School Officers, National Association of State Boards of Education, and the National Congress of Parents and Teachers. State governance has not been studied extensively since the work of Dr. Robert Will of the United States Office of Education, beginning in 1955. Dr. Will published an extensive analysis of the state structure of education in each of the 50 states in 1955, and this publication was revised and republished in 1960. There is also a more recent study of state structure published by the United States Office of Education.

The new study of state structure will offer several alternative models for governance at the state level. Regional meetings are now in progress in various parts of the country to explain the alternatives, and to solicit the opinions of the various educational groups relative to the acceptability

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of each of the alternatives. The meeting for our area was held in Denver on October 16. I attended that meeting and listened to the opinions expressed. But I came away with the feeling that the governance project had somehow managed to get the cart before the horse. All of the discussion centered around the structure for governing education, without regard to the functions to be performed at various levels of government. If one accepts the notion expressed by the architects that "form follows function," then it would appear to me that the way to design a structure (form) for governing education would be to consider first the functions that are to be performed. Once the decision is made as to the functions to be performed, it should be relatively simple to decide what form or structure is necessary to assign the functions among the various levels of government and to the various kinds of officials needed to carry out the functions.

To illustrate, let me refer to the discussion relative to the placement of the office of governor in the administrative structure of education. The question was raised about the governor's cabinet system, with the state commissioner of education appointed by the governor, sitting with other heads of state government in advising the governor on matters of state policy. Under this administrative structure, the commissioner of education would participate in decisions involving highways, welfare, and other matters far afield from education, eliminating the separateness which now exists generally in educational governance at all levels of government. Of course it has long been advocated by many political scientists that education should not be separated out from the other governmental functions. But this movement has had little support from the education establishment. The point was made eventually that if the governor is to be expected to perform the function of leadership in increased state funding, for example, he would probably be

expected to demand a commensurate degree of influence on how the money is to be spent. What goals are to be achieved by the additional state money? What values will be served? What functions are to be performed?

It would appear to me that we can make sense out of educational governance only if we systematically analyze where we are, where we want to be, and what instruments or vehicles are needed to move us in the right direction. Once these questions are decided then we can design a form or structure suitable to the expressed goals and values.

Education is governed by both a formal and an informal structure. The formal structure is obvious, consisting of boards, commissions and officials. But there is also an informal structure which governs education, not so obvious, but just as potent. This informal structure is made up of diverse elements such as the publishers of school textbooks, the manufacturers and distributors of school supplies and equipment, the local real estate boards and chambers of commerce, the money lenders, and the insurance companies, to mention but a few. One of the most effective lobbies in Washington is the national association which represents the manufacturers and distributors of audio-visual equipment. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act provided funds for several important educational functions, but it also provided funds for the purchase of millions of dollars worth of equipment, thus taking the edge off the altruism of some of the most effective supporters of the bill. Hundreds of examples of legislation advocated or passed to serve the interests of this informal structure could be cited. At the local level, the real estate board and the chamber of commerce wield important influence whenever their interests are involved.

The influence of the informal structure at either the federal state or local level has not been subjected to very extensive study, because of the

very significant difficulties of research design, particularly as to the securing of valid and reliable data. But a very careful case study of the firing of one superintendent would probably add more to our understanding of educational governance than the present typical doctoral dissertation, in which the student sends out a simple-minded questionnaire, then applies chi square and other sophisticated statistical treatment to data which are unreliable, unimportant and unnecessary.

Let us add another idea to the earlier thought that form follows function in designing a system for educational governance. Suppose we advance the notion that in an administrative structure, every decision should be made at the lowest level of the administrative structure at which it may be safely made, taking into consideration the general public interest. For example, who should decide whether the Junior Chamber of Commerce should be allowed to use the high school gymnasium for a donkey basketball game? In practice the location of decisions of this sort varies quite considerably. In the larger districts the building principal would ordinarily decide, based upon a written board policy which sets forth the terms and conditions of building use. In smaller districts the superintendent of schools may retain this authority, and in a few districts, the board may wish to pass on each and every decision as to the use of school buildings. It would seem reasonable that the lowest level at which this decision can be safely exercised in all school districts is at the building level. Surely the principal is in a better position to know the demands on space than anyone else. The board can legislate the necessary policy controls, thus freeing board time for more important questions of general educational policy. At this point it becomes necessary, however, to ask another question: Is it desirable, is it even safe, to allow the board

to discuss questions of basic educational policy? Perhaps it would be safer, as a superintendent, to bury the board in mountains of minutiae, thus making it impossible for the board ever to consider policy questions. It is far easier for the superintendent to lead a board through a decision on the amount of blacktop to put on the tennis court than it would be to lead the board into a decision to expand the curriculum to meet the needs of those who are presently dropping out of our present high school curriculum. Whenever I hear a superintendent complain that the board members are getting over into administration, I raise the question: Who led them there? Since the superintendent makes out the board agenda in virtually all cases, a procedure which I feel is not in the public interest, then it should logically follow that if the board gets into administration it does so because the superintendent opened the door via his own agenda. If you doubt the validity of this assertion, pick up 100 school board agendas and analyze their contents. And while you are looking ask yourself also whether or not the agenda is sent out in advance of the board meetings and whether it conveys any information upon which the board member might be expected to think in advance of the board meeting.

Let us consider for a moment the state/local power dichotomy. It is sometimes said that governmental power is exercised through the Golden Rule--he who has the gold makes the rules. Accordingly it is said that the greater the degree of state financing, the greater the degree of state control. Yet no one has apparently investigated the accuracy of this assertion by comparing for example the degree of state control in New Mexico with its 85 per cent state support, with that exercised in Nebraska where the state support is nearer 20 per cent. It should be apparent to almost anyone that the kinds

of functions exercised by the state department of education vary quite widely among the 50 states. In Hawaii, the state department of education directly operates the schools, since there is only one school district. In all states, certification of teachers is exercised at the state level for most districts although Chicago is exempted from the state certification system in Illinois. Accreditation of schools is an accepted state function despite the fact that there is little evidence to support the effectiveness of accreditation. By way of illustration both Kansas and Florida have very recently removed the requirement that schools be accredited in order to receive state financial support, and a move will be made in the legislature in Florida next year to make accreditation purely voluntary, as it probably should be.

Beyond the usual functions of teacher certification and school accreditation, the activities of state departments of education vary quite widely. In some states, the state board decides whether or not the people should have an opportunity to vote on the question of issuance of bonds. In other states, the state department of education, through a $15,000 political appointee, decides whether or not a licensed architect paid $100,000 did a good job on school building design. In other states, it is decided at the state level whether or not textbooks are fit to be used in the local schools. In a few states, the state department must approve the budget of each local school district. Many states lodge quasi-judicial appellate functions in the state department of education, and this activity is developed to the extreme in New York and New Jersey through commissioner's decisions. In Maryland a one line statute giving the state "visitatorial" powers has been broadened over the years into a state system of legislation through state board rules and regulations. Most of the notions of centralization of authority are based

upon conditions which no longer exist--that there is out there in the sticks an uneducated populace which may not be safely entrusted to make any important decisions. But the performance of both state and federal agencies of government does not lend much credence to the arguments that educational policy should be shifted further away from local school districts. The Watergate controversy does not inspire public confidence in the federal government, nor does the recent edict which places the entire majesty of the federal government behind a prohibition of coke machines in school cafeterias. At the state level, the Tennessee legislature passed, almost unanimously, a bill which required equal emphasis upon the explanation of the origins of the world in Genesis, if evolution is taught as a theory in biology classes. In California, the State Board of Education spent the better part of a year considering the question of expunging evolution altogether from school textbooks. It is certainly true that local school boards and superintendents sometimes do dumb things, but they also do some very wise things and in no case is stupidity a function of the level of government and the performance of state government and federal agencies does not inspire confidence in their superior wisdom or their superior command of the public interest.

Let me advance one additional notion to the other two thus far advanced, that there is an authority/responsibility corollary which cannot be safely ignored. This principle works in two ways. First, if a governmental agency is to be given authority, it must be held responsible for the quality of its decisions. But there is another side to the coin, and that is that the governmental agency which is to be expected to carry out some function, to be held responsible for performance, must be given sufficient authority to carry out the function assigned. It is at this point that those of us who are

interested in governance of schools at the local level should be most concerned. Over the past decade or so there has been a steady dilution of the authority of local school boards through legislative enactments and court decisions. The United States Supreme Court has extended the due process clause of the 14th amendment, in student discipline cases, to the extent that it is very difficult to maintain a reasonable level of order in our schools.

At the same time there is a drive for "accountability" on the part of local school boards. The incongruity of the accountability drive lies in the simple fact that boards are expected to be accountable beyond their power to exercise authority. Collective bargaining laws, tenure statutes, teacher certification restrictions, accreditation rules all limit boards of education in carrying out the functions which the legislature expects them to perform.

Very recently, the states have begun to experiment with a plan of control which has been borrowed from the federal government. It is the concept of basing the funding of a specific educational program upon the submission and approval of a plan. The approved plan concept presents the opportunity for total control, in that whoever approves the plan can determine what is to be included or excluded from the plan. At the same time that the commissioners of education have been meeting to protest the approved plan at the federal level, they are rushing to implement the approved plan approach at the state level.

A few years ago the United States government decided that it was necessary to strengthen state departments of education, and Title V was enacted into law. In virtually all states, considerably more than half of the State

Department of Education budget comes from federal programs. Now no one has ever asked the question of why the state legislatures were unwilling to provide additional staffing or programs in the state departments of education. It is at least conceivable that the state legislatures regarded the existing state arrangements to be adequate to exercise the supervisory functions necessary to pursue the state's interest in public education. The intrusion of the federal government into state department staffing has resulted in some instances in the creation of services which are not sought, resources which are not utilized, and the establishment of personnel whose main function is to design report forms to further burden local school districts.

What seems to be needed, in my judgment, is a rather systematic study of governmental functions in education. We should have sufficient courage to ruthlessly cut out those functions which no longer serve any constructive purpose, whether these functions are local, state or national in character. We should be willing to move into new areas when it is demonstrated that there are important educational interests not presently being adequately served by our educational system. Once we have identified the functions which are essential to the mission of public education, it should be relatively simple to move on to the question of designing a structure to assign the functions to appropriate levels of government.

Finally, we should consider the role of public control in a system of education which claims to be public in nature. It appears that, as the educational level of our populace increases, the degree of control retained by the public has steadily diminished. This direction is actively encouraged by the National Education Association with its announced design to take over effective control of the essential direction of American public education.

At the state level, this drive is manifested through so-called professional practices commissions and the elimination of public control of teacher certification. At the local level, the drive is focussed upon collective bargaining, including binding arbitration, getting teachers elected to local school boards, and providing administrative appeals from local school board decisions, to name but a few strategies.

At the same time, attention has been diverted from the real problem by those who keep talking about local control, when the real goal should be the preservation of lay control. That is to say that the essential direction of American public education should be a public decision, arrived at by publicly elected governmental agencies, operating in a public fashion carrying out the public interest. It has been said that education is not merely a function of government, it is government itself. In a democratic society, public education is the means through which that society is preserved and developed. If public control is lost, either through indirection or design, then public support will eventually be reduced and the system will fall. All of us who are interested in public education should be alarmed at the rapid growth of nonpublic schools in the last five or six years. If the trend continues, the political support for public schools will diminish to the point that the quality of public education will suffer. Indeed the entire system would be imperiled. If the great American middle class ever deserts the public school system, then the entire structure will fail.

Let me summarize very quickly what I have tried to say. First, that the form of governmental structure in public education should naturally flow out of a definition of functions to be performed. Second, that in any administrative structure, the guiding principle in the locus of decision making should

be to place every decision at the lowest level of the structure in which the decision may be safely made in the public interest. Third, that there is a necessary relationship between authority and responsibility. The one must always exist in its relationship with the other.

Perhaps the national governance study will present us with an opportunity to focus public attention upon the need for reform in educational governance. We must move away from the discussion of isolated questions of control of a specific educational function, and design the administrative structure which will prepare our children to meet the problems and opportunities of the 21st century.

And that is what public education is all about, the meeting of the needs of children as they prepare to assume the responsibilities and rights of citizenship in a democratic form of government. If we fail in public education, we cannot expect to make self-government succeed at any level.